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IN MIDDLE ENGLAND

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EVENT REPORTS

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ANNE HARDY



URBAN GARDENS London Olympia, 6-9 May

Urban Gardens is now in its third year. It sells itself as a 'a great shopping experience . . . a place to ask questions, get advice and be inspired'. Opening two weeks before the Royal Horticultural Society Chelsea Flower Show, and at the start of the gardening year, it is in the perfect position to make its mark in the gardening calendar and trade off some of the Chelsea buzz.

Unfortunately, after a very good first year the show appeared to lose its way in the second year and is now struggling to make up ground. There seems a general lack of confidence in the show, from both the public and designers, which was partially restored when the Business Design Centre (BDC) took over the running of it earlier this year.

To be fair to the BDC, it hasn't had time to make its mark on the show, but all audiences are now extremely sophisticated and if they pay good money they want to be entertained and excited. Fake grass and scattered glass gravel simply doesn't cut it!

However, there are indications that Urban Gardens is improving. One of the highlights was the 'Design clinic', where members of the public were able to have an express makeover of their garden by known garden designers — it was very busy throughout the show. Celebrity speakers were also timetabled throughout the four days to entertain us in the theatre, beautifully designed by garden designer Andy Sturgeon. Both these features were included in the price of the ticket.

The 'Research clinic' was another great idea. Banks of monitors recorded the response of the public to the show, providing valuable information from which the organisers can formulate future strategies.

There were also ten show gardens — one of which I designed with Rachel Merrick. 'The retreat' illustrated what could be done with a small (3.5m x 4.5m) urban space. It featured a unique curtain of falling water by Bamber Wallis, etched glass panels, tiered copper planters (containing two *Betula pendula* 'Youngii' under

planted with a mixture of herbaceous perennials and annuals) and a fire pit. People really seemed to enjoy the show gardens: not only as a feast for the eyes, but also because they demonstrate practical solutions for their own gardens. An added bonus is that the designer is usually around to talk through the plants, hard landscape and accessories. I hope that Urban Gardens makes these gardens an integral part of the show, especially as, at Olympia, you can still take a leisurely look around without being jostled along. The space is also warm and dry with lots of natural light streaming down through the vast atrium — it is a very enjoyable experience.

So what does Urban Gardens mean to garden designers? On a practical level, garden designers who had been coming to the show (for the past three years) and paying for an exhibition stand were in agreement that, for them, it delivers lots of work.

In the bigger picture, consumer shows such as Urban Gardens and trade shows such as Fifth Room (Olympia, 12-14 September) generate and sustain our curiosity in all things gardening. Increasingly, people are recognising that professional garden design is essential if you are going to expertly select and combine the different elements from this plethora of choice — and produce a successful garden. It may look easy, but it isn't . . . and this can only mean good news for garden designers.

*Anne Hardy, garden designer,
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Above right: 'The retreat', a show garden at Urban Gardens 2004, by Anne Hardy and Rachel Merrick, with Bamber Wallis.

Above left: 'Eco camp' show garden, by Helen Tindale (Reversed Out, London).